

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

### FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN GULF ISLANDS NATIONAL SEASHORE December 2009

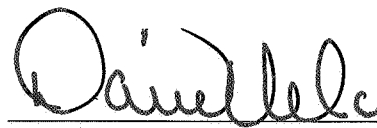
Based on the following summary of effects, as discussed in the attached environmental assessment (EA), it has been determined that the proposed action would not have a significant impact on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are negligible or minor in intensity. There would be no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the action would not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection laws. Therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required.

Recommended by:

  
Jeff Eubanks, Superintendent, GUIS

Date: 12/24/09

Approved by:

  
David Vela, SE Regional Director

Date: 1-14-10

**Introduction:** National Park Service (NPS) Wildland Fire Management Guidelines (DO-18) require that all parks with vegetation capable of sustaining fire develop a wildland fire management plan (FMP). The plan should meet the specific resource management objectives for that park and ensure that firefighter and public safety are not compromised.

The FMP serves as a detailed and comprehensive program of action to implement federal fire management policy principles and goals. The purpose of this federal action is to develop a fire management plan and program that utilizes the benefits of fire to achieve desired natural and cultural resource conditions while minimizing the fire danger to park resources and adjacent lands from hazardous fuel accumulations. There is a need to manage native plant communities and restore and protect the historic landscape. At the same time, visitors, facilities, and resources on and adjacent to Gulf Islands National Seashore (GUIS) must be safeguarded.

**Selected Alternative:** The NPS has elected to implement the preferred alternative from the FMP Environmental Assessment (EA). Under the preferred alternative, the GUIS 1999 Fire Management Plan will be updated and implemented. Under this alternative an additional Fire management Unit (FMU) will be added based on the inclusion of Cat Island to the Seashore's holdings. In addition, the overall fire management objectives for several FMUs will be altered. Specifically, management within each unit will include a combination of the following methods:

Wildland Fire Suppression: A wildland fire is defined as any nonstructural fire, other than prescribed fire, that occurs in the wildland. All wildland fires at GUIS, regardless of origin, will be suppressed. Wildland fire use for resource benefits will not occur at the seashore.

Prescribed Fire: Prescribed fire would be used primarily to promote ecosystem sustainability and to reduce hazard fuels accumulations, which in turn would initiate nutrient recycling for healthy soil conditions. Specific burn plans for each FMU will guide the use of prescribed fire.

Non-Fire Applications: Non-fire fuels treatment at GUIS will include general grounds-care operations such as mowing and weed eating open areas during the growing season; reducing hazard fuels accumulations and promoting ecosystem sustainability in areas where conditions preclude the safe implementation of prescribed fire; maintaining existing defensible space around seashore structures; maintaining existing firebreaks (including refurbishing existing holding lines around prescribed fire units prior to burning them); and creating and/or maintaining hazard fuels breaks along sections of the seashore perimeter to help prevent the spread of fire to and from adjacent non-agency land.

Debris Burns: The Seashore will continue debris burns to dispose of wildland fuels, such as slash piles generated from a variety of maintenance activities.

Manual and Mechanical Fuels Treatment (i.e. Thinning): Non-fire fuels treatment at GUIS will include general grounds-care operations such as mowing and weed eating open areas during the growing season; reducing hazard fuels accumulations and promoting ecosystem sustainability in areas where conditions preclude the safe implementation of prescribed fire; maintaining existing defensible space around seashore structures; maintaining existing firebreaks (including refurbishing existing holding lines around prescribed fire units prior to burning them); and

creating and/or maintaining hazard fuels breaks along sections of the seashore perimeter to help prevent the spread of fire to and from adjacent non-agency land.

Reducing hazard fuels accumulations, Maintenance of existing defensible space, refurbishing existing holding lines, and treating units prior to prescribed burning, may involve mowing, weed eating, raking, chain sawing, or bush hogging.

### **Mitigation for the Selected Alternative**

#### **Protection of Wilderness Resources**

All suppression activities and all mechanical or prescribed wildland fire actions will be subject to a minimum requirements determination to ascertain whether the action is necessary and appropriate in wilderness or potential wilderness. See NPS Management Policies (2006) Section 6.3.9 and 4.5. If the action is both necessary and appropriate to protect wilderness resources and values, the action will be further analyzed to determine the minimum tool necessary to accomplish the objectives of the proposed action. Whenever possible, GUIS will use minimum impact suppression tactics to minimize or prevent damage to wilderness.

The particulars of the minimum requirements determination process are as follows: Gulf Islands National Seashore will use the Minimum Requirement Analysis Worksheet (Attachment \_ hereto) to complete a minimum requirements determination for the specific management activities identified in Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act, i.e., use of a temporary road, use of motor vehicles, use of motorized equipment (and motorboats), aircraft overflights, the landing of aircraft, use of any form of mechanical transport, and the use of structures or installations. All proposed fire-management actions in wilderness or potential wilderness – including ranger activities, natural resource research and monitoring, cultural resource treatment-related activities, trail maintenance practices, facility placement or replacement, and special park uses – will be analyzed using this process. Except in the case of prescribed fire, the results of this analysis will be included in all final decision documents and will be approved by the Park Superintendent and/or Regional Director, as appropriate.

For prescribed fire, the Seashore has completed a programmatic minimum requirement determination as part of the planning process for managing wildland fire at GUIS. All aspects of the prescribed fire program that are considered routine, or non-routine but predictable, have been evaluated using the minimum requirement analysis set forth in the Attachment. These actions will be implemented without additional compliance following the identified (approved) methodologies.

Any future activity undertaken in connection with prescribed fire that is not adequately addressed in the FMP, but has the potential to affect the wilderness, will be analyzed separately using the park's minimum requirement procedure.

The selected alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative. Fire management activities under the selected alternative will restore and maintain native plant communities in the park, mimic the natural ecological processes, and help protect park resources and adjacent lands from the threat of wildfires. The selected alternative also best protects and helps preserve the historic, cultural, and natural resources in the park for current and future generations.

**Other Alternatives Considered:** A No Action alternative was also considered in detail in the Environmental Assessment. The No Action alternative, required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), assumes continuation of current management, and provides a baseline for comparing the effects of action alternatives. Currently, fire management at the Seashore is regulated by the 1999 FMP. Under this alternative, human-caused wildland fires would be suppressed under all circumstances, while allowing for the management and limited use of naturally-caused wildland fires in some FMUs. In addition, prescribed fires, debris burns, and manual/mechanical fuel treatments would be utilized to reduce fire hazard and restore ecological communities.

## **WHY THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT**

As defined at 40 CFR §1508.27, from the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality that implement the provisions of NEPA, significance is determined by examining the following criteria:

*Impacts may have both beneficial and adverse aspects and which on balance may be beneficial, but that may still have significant adverse impacts which require analysis in an EIS.*

There are overall benefits to the human and cultural environment at the Park from the proposed actions. The Preferred Alternative, in particular, will have positive effects on the human health and safety of the Park's visitors, staff, neighboring residents, on Park facilities, and Park landscapes. Hazard fuels reduction along the Park's perimeter will help to prevent the spread of wildland fire to and from adjacent non-agency land. The removal of woody shrubs and excess trees from wooded areas will benefit the visual landscape on the Park by preserving the cultural landscape associated with the Park.

The preferred alternative does not entail any significant adverse impacts on soils, wildlife, human health and safety, and visitor use and experience. These impacts are minor, localized, and short-term. None of the impacts rise to the level of significance.

*The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

When conducting fire management activities, human health and safety is the primary concern. Under the Preferred Alternative, there will likely be very minor human health and safety impacts (small cuts and bruises) to firefighters resulting from wildland fire suppression activities and prescribed fire activities. The preferred alternative provides protection by creating and maintaining a hazard fuels break along the Park's perimeter and maintaining areas of defensible space around Park buildings, thus minimizing the fire danger to Park staff and nearby private residences and communities. Prescribed fire and use of heavy equipment may lead to minor/temporary impacts on surrounding air quality.

***The degree to which the action affects unique characteristics of the potentially affected area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.***

No direct impact to known cultural resources are anticipated.

Proposed activities, including fire suppression, construction of fuel breaks, thinning, and prescribed burning, may impact cultural resources. Cultural resources surveys, performed prior to conducting fire management activities, would minimize these impacts. Any issues/concerns would be addressed in specific unit burn/mechanical fuel reduction plans.

Wilderness areas may be impacted by fire suppression activities, prescribed burning, and maintenance of defensible space. These activities would not seriously compromise wilderness values.

Minor, short-term impacts on visual resources and visitor experience may occur during fuels treatments and prescribed burning activities.

Mitigation measures and monitoring would be conducted based on a well-defined set of monitoring protocols and recommended standards established by the NPS. These guidelines and methods are presented in the *NPS Fire Monitoring Handbook* (USDI NPS 2001). The fire effects monitoring program established at GUIS follows the guidelines and recommendations described in the *NPS Fire Monitoring Handbook* with some modifications.

On November 30, 2007, the Florida Department of State, Division of Historic Resources, concurred with the NPS determination that implementation of the proposed actions “adequately addresses the concern for prehistoric and historic resources located within the Gulf Islands National Seashore.”

***The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.***

There were no controversial impacts identified during the analysis done for the EA, and no controversial issues were raised during the public review of the EA.

***Degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.***

There would be very minor risks to human health and safety during suppression, fuels reduction, and prescribed burning activities. There are no identified risks associated with the Preferred Alternative that are unique or unknown, and there are no effects associated with the Preferred Alternative that are highly uncertain identified during the analysis for the EA or during the public review of the EA.

***The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.***

The preferred alternative does not establish a precedent for any future actions that may have significant effects, nor does it represent decisions about future considerations. The purpose of this action is to develop a FMP and fire management program that best achieves the desired natural resource conditions while minimizing the wildland fire danger to Park resources and adjacent lands.

***Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.***

The NPS determined that there will be no significant cumulative impacts associated with the preferred alternative.

***The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed on National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.***

The EA was written in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. On November 30, 2007, the Florida Department of State, Division of Historic Resources, concurred with the NPS determination that implementation of the proposed actions “adequately addresses the concern for prehistoric and historic resources located within the Gulf Islands National Seashore

***The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.***

On January 13, 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the NPS determination that the proposed action “is not likely to adversely affect resources protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973.....”

***Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.***

This action violates no Federal, State, or local environmental protection laws.

### ***Impairment***

In addition to reviewing the list of significance criteria, the NPS has determined that implementation of the proposed actions will not constitute an impairment to the critical resources and values of the Park. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the FMP and its EA, public comment, relevant scientific studies, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker guided by the direction in NPS *Management Policies 2006*. Overall, the plan results in benefits to Park resources and values, opportunities for their enjoyment, and it does not result in their impairment.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The EA was made available for public review and comment during a 30-day period ending December 22, 2008. A legal notice announcing its availability was published in the local paper on November 21, 2008. Comments were received from four agencies, all of which were favorable and/or endorsed full implementation of the FMP. One public comment was received

which did not identify issues or concerns not previously addressed in the EA. Comments received did not result in changes to text within the EA.